

Dear Chairman Martin:

I am writing to challenge the Comcast/Time Warner/Adelphia merger (FCC Docket No. 05-192) and the AT&T/BellSouth merger (FCC Docket No. 06-74). Allowing the largest telecommunications company and the two largest cable companies in the United States to grow even larger does not serve the public interest.

As Executive Director of the Public Access Corporation of the District of Columbia, I represent over 1,000 individuals across the full spectrum of political and personal perspectives who volunteer over 100,000 hours each year to ensure diverse views and perspectives are represented in media, and enliven public dialogue.

The concentration of media power is a growing problem in this country. Though we have more channels available than ever before, they are increasingly falling under the control of a handful of giant corporations. The corporation's decisions about flow of information, and what information reaches the public, and in what concentration, are determined not by the best means to serve the public interest and need for diverse and free flow of a full range of perspectives as the basis of democracy, but by the prevailing business practices involving the bottom line concerns of investors, Wall Street, and other integrated economic drivers. Such dense concentration of media ownership can not be viewed in the narrow lens of a business decision and a limited frame of selected consumer interests, but must weigh the greater cost of its effect on democracy and whether we continue to ensure the means for an informed citizenry.

Other economic factors are also of importance. The cost of broadband service remains out of reach for many households. The effect of this merger combined with its preceding mergers that have brought this country to such dense media concentration contributes significantly to exclusion of low-income and rural Americans from use of telecommunications tools that are increasingly the single most important asset in the global economy. Americans are hungry for more competition in services. However, these mergers will only starve Americans of this needed competition and limit their ability to grow small businesses that are essential to our economy.

In addition, the few mega-companies resulting from these mergers have such broadreaching market power, that the resulting environments deprives America of small, innovative companies that fulfill such a vital role in our contry's economic and technological progress, both at home and abroad. Short-term policy decisions may have the unintended effect to severly limit our national potential for innovation and creative applications that would keep the U.S. strong in the global marketplace on the longer term. The information infrastructure must provide support as a matter of sound public policy for the nation's economy, and the the role the economy plays in our national security.

Without certain conditions, these mergers do not serve these aspects of the public interest. Allowing AT&T to combine with BellSouth will give the top three broadband providers control of over half of all broadband connections in the country. At the same time, the Time Warner/Comcast/Adelphia merger will give Comcast and Time Warner increased power over entire regions of the United States, allowing rates to rise even as the digital divide continues to grow.

The FCC should block these transactions or impose strict conditions to protect free speech and competition under its "public interest standard." If the FCC decides to allow either of these mergers, it should require the following conditions:

1. Subscribers must be able to choose from competitive Internet Service Providers ("open access"). The FCC should also ensure that these companies cannot discriminate against any Internet content or rival service and that every service will be treated exactly the same ("Network Neutrality").
2. Companies must be required to sell broadband access separate from video and telephone service, and at the same price ("naked broadband" or "unbundling").
3. Any subscriber must be able to connect any device to the network (such as a Wi-Fi router) that does not harm the network.
4. Take steps to protect public access programming ("PEG"). Cable companies have become less responsive to the needs and requirements of communities. The quality of public accountability in local franchise agreements has declined, as big companies leverage their power to squeeze local governments. Likewise, telecommunications giants — like AT&T — are trying to eliminate the remaining vestiges of effective local oversight and control altogether.
5. Independent programmers must be able to reach subscribers.
6. Any company that owns both programming and video systems should be required to provide competitors with access to their regional sports and other programming needed to offer competing services, so consumers will still have real choices.

In conclusion, I ask the FCC to consider the interests of the people like me and the others I represent who spend so much of their valuable time working to enliven public dialogue and ensure there is always a full range of perspectives, and who pay the cable, telephone and broadband bills. Many of us already have enough trouble trying to afford broadband or cable TV, and in many cases already cannot afford these services. Please don't make it even harder for us to find competitors, or make it easier for Comcast, Time Warner and AT&T to raise prices or block local and independent voices.